

MULTICOMPONENT FIBERS COMPRISING STARCH AND BIODEGRADABLE
POLYMERS

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to environmentally degradable multicomponent fibers comprising starch and biodegradable polymers and specific configurations of the fibers. The fibers are used to make nonwoven webs and disposable articles.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

There have been many attempts to make environmentally degradable articles out of fibers. However, because of costs, the difficulty in processing, and end-use properties, there has been little commercial success. Many compositions that have excellent degradability have only limited processability. Conversely, compositions which are more easily processable have reduced biodegradability, dispersibility, and flushability.

Useful fibers with excellent environmental degradability for nonwoven articles are difficult to produce and pose additional challenges compared to films and laminates. This is because the material and processing characteristics for fibers is much more stringent than for producing films, blow-molding articles, and injection-molding articles. For the production of fibers, the processing time during structure formation is typically much shorter and flow characteristics are more demanding on the material's physical and rheological characteristics. The local strain rate and shear rate are much greater in fiber production than other processes. Additionally, a homogeneous composition is required for fiber spinning. For spinning very fine fibers, small defects, slight inconsistencies, or non-homogeneity in the melt are not acceptable for a commercially viable process. The more attenuated the fibers or specific the configuration, the more critical the processing conditions and selection of materials.

To produce environmentally degradable articles, attempts have been made to process natural starch on standard equipment and existing technology known in the plastic industry. Since

natural starch generally has a granular structure, it needs to be "destructurized" before it can be melt processed into fine denier filaments. Modified starch (alone or as the major component of a blend) has been found to have poor melt extensibility resulting in difficulty in successfully production of fibers, films, foams or the like. Additionally, starch fibers are difficult to spin and are virtually unusable to make nonwovens due to the low tensile strength, stickiness, and the inability to be bonded to form nonwovens.

To produce fibers that have more acceptable processability and end-use properties, biodegradable polymers need to be combined with starch. Selection of a suitable biodegradable polymer that is acceptable for blending with starch is challenging. The biodegradable polymer must have good spinning properties and a suitable melting temperature. The melting temperature must be high enough for end-use stability to prevent melting or structural deformation, but not too high of a melting temperature to be able to be processable with starch without burning the starch. These requirements make selection of a biodegradable polymer to produce starch-containing multicomponent fibers very difficult.

Consequently, there is a need for environmentally degradable multicomponent fibers and fibers that are cost-effective. These multicomponent fibers are comprised of starch and biodegradable polymers. Moreover, the starch and polymer composition should be suitable for use in conventional processing equipment used to make the multicomponent fibers. There is also a need for disposable, nonwoven articles made from these fibers.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention discloses environmentally degradable multicomponent fibers. The configuration of the multicomponent fibers may be side-by-side, sheath-core, segmented pie, islands-in-the-sea, or any combination of configurations. Each component of the fiber will comprise destructurized starch and/or a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer.

The present invention is also directed to nonwoven webs and disposable articles comprising the environmentally degradable multicomponent fibers. The nonwoven webs may also contain other synthetic or natural fibers blended with the multicomponent fibers of the present invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

These and other features, aspects and advantages of the present invention will become better understood with regard to the following description, appended claims, and accompanying drawings where:

Figure 1 is schematic drawings illustrating a cross-sectional view of a bicomponent fiber having a sheath-core configuration.

Figure 2 is schematic drawings illustrating a cross-sectional view of a bicomponent fiber having a segmented pie configuration.

Figure 3 is schematic drawing illustrating a cross-sectional view of a bicomponent fiber having a ribbon configuration.

Figure 4 is schematic drawings illustrating a cross-sectional view of a bicomponent fiber having a side-by-side configuration.

Figure 5 is schematic drawings illustrating a cross-sectional view of a bicomponent fiber having an islands-in-the-sea configuration.

Figure 6 is schematic drawing illustrating a cross-sectional view of a tricomponent fiber having a ribbon configuration.

Figure 7 is schematic drawing illustrating a cross-sectional view of a tricomponent fiber having a concentric sheath-core configuration.

Figure 8 is schematic drawing illustrating a cross-sectional view of a multicomponent fiber having an eight segmented pie configuration.

Figure 9 is a schematic drawing illustrating a cross-sectional view of a tricomponent fiber having an islands-in-the-sea configuration.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

All percentages, ratios and proportions used herein are by weight percent of the composition, unless otherwise specified. Examples are given in parts of the total.

The specification contains a detailed description of (1) materials of the present invention, (2) configuration of the multicomponent fibers, (3) material properties of the multicomponent fibers, (4) processes, and (5) articles.

(1) Materials

Starch

The present invention relates to the use of starch, a low cost naturally occurring polymer. The starch used in the present invention is destructureized starch, which is necessary for adequate

spinning performance and fiber properties. Thermoplastic starch is used to mean destructured starch with a plasticizer. In the multi-component fibers of the present invention, the starch may be part of the thermoplastic polymer and starch blend. Alternatively, the starch may be combined with a plasticizer and used as a separate component of the fiber. This component of the fiber may not comprise a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer.

Since natural starch generally has a granular structure, it needs to be destructured before it can be melt processed and spun like a thermoplastic material. For gelatinization, the starch can be destructured in the presence of a solvent which acts as a plasticizer. The solvent and starch mixture is heated, typically under pressurized conditions and shear to accelerate the gelatinization process. Chemical or enzymatic agents may also be used to destructure, oxidize, or derivatize the starch. Commonly, starch is destructured by dissolving the starch in water. Fully destructured starch results when no lumps impacting the fiber spinning process are present.

Suitable naturally occurring starches can include, but are not limited to, corn starch, potato starch, sweet potato starch, wheat starch, sago palm starch, tapioca starch, rice starch, soybean starch, arrow root starch, bracken starch, lotus starch, cassava starch, waxy maize starch, high amylose corn starch, and commercial amylose powder. Blends of starch may also be used.

Though all starches are useful herein, the present invention is most commonly practiced with natural starches derived from agricultural sources, which offer the advantages of being abundant in supply, easily replenishable and inexpensive in price. Naturally occurring starches, particularly corn starch, wheat starch, and waxy maize starch, are the preferred starch polymers of choice due to their economy and availability.

Modified starch may also be used. Modified starch is defined as non-substituted or substituted starch that has had its native molecular weight characteristics changed (i.e. the molecular weight is changed but no other changes are necessarily made to the starch). If modified starch is desired, chemical modifications of starch typically include acid or alkali hydrolysis and oxidative chain scission to reduce molecular weight and molecular weight distribution. Natural, unmodified starch generally has a very high average molecular weight and a broad molecular weight distribution (e.g. natural corn starch has an average molecular weight of up to about 60,000,000 grams/mole (g/mol)). The average molecular weight of starch can be reduced to the desirable range for the present invention by acid reduction, oxidation reduction, enzymatic reduction, hydrolysis (acid or alkaline catalyzed), physical/mechanical degradation (e.g., via the thermomechanical energy input of the processing equipment), or combinations thereof. The thermomechanical method and the oxidation method offer an additional advantage when carried

out *in situ*. The exact chemical nature of the starch and molecular weight reduction method is not critical as long as the average molecular weight is in an acceptable range. Ranges of molecular weight for starch or starch blends added to the melt is from about 3,000 g/mol to about 2,000,000 g/mol, preferably from about 10,000 g/mol to about 1,000,000 g/mol, and more preferably from about 20,000 g/mol to about 700,000 g/mol.

Although not required, substituted starch can be used. If substituted starch is desired, chemical modifications of starch typically include etherification and esterification. Substituted starches may be desired for better compatibility or miscibility with the thermoplastic polymer and plasticizer. However, this must be balanced with the reduction in their rate of degradability.

The degree of substitution of the chemically substituted starch is from about 0.01 to 3.0. A low degree of substitution, 0.01 to 0.06, may be preferred.

Typically, the starch is present in an amount of from about 1% to about 99%, preferably from about 10% to about 85%, more preferably from about 20% to about 75%, and most preferably from about 40% to about 60% of the starch and polymer composition or of the total fiber. Alternatively, the thermoplastic starch (starch combined with a plasticizer) may comprise up to 100% of one component of the multicomponent fiber. The weight of starch in the composition includes starch and its naturally occurring bound water content. The term "bound water" means the water found naturally occurring in starch and before mixing of starch with other components to make the composition of the present invention. The term "free water" means the water that is added in making the composition of the present invention. A person of ordinary skill in the art would recognize that once the components are mixed in a composition, water can no longer be distinguished by its origin. The starch typically has a bound water content of about 5% to 16% by weight of starch. It is known that additional free water may be incorporated as the polar solvent or plasticizer, and not included in the weight of the starch.

Biodegradable Thermoplastic Polymers

A biodegradable thermoplastic polymers which is substantially compatible with starch is also required in the present invention. As used herein, the term "substantially compatible" means when heated to a temperature above the softening and/or the melting temperature of the composition, the polymer is capable of forming a substantially homogeneous mixture with the starch after mixing with shear or extension. The thermoplastic polymer used will be able to flow upon heating to form a processable melt and resolidify as a result of crystallization or vitrification.

The polymer must have a melting temperature sufficiently low to prevent significant degradation of the starch during compounding and yet be sufficiently high for thermal stability during use of the fiber. Suitable melting temperatures of biodegradable polymers are from about 80° to about 190°C and preferably from about 90° to about 180°C. Thermoplastic polymers having a melting temperature above 190°C may be used if plasticizers or diluents are used to lower the observed melting temperature. The polymer must have rheological characteristics suitable for melt spinning. The molecular weight of the biodegradable polymer must be sufficiently high to enable entanglement between polymer molecules and yet low enough to be melt spinnable. For melt spinning, biodegradable thermoplastic polymers having molecular weights below 500,000 g/mol, preferably from about 10,000 g/mol to about 400,000 g/mol, more preferable from about 50,000 g/mol to about 300,000 g/mol and most preferably from about 100,000 g/mol to about 200,000 g/mol.

The biodegradable thermoplastic polymers must be able to solidify fairly rapidly, preferably under extensional flow, and form a thermally stable fiber structure, as typically encountered in known processes as staple fibers (spin draw process) or spunbond continuous filament process.

The biodegradable polymers suitable for use herein are those biodegradable materials which are susceptible to being assimilated by microorganisms such as molds, fungi, and bacteria when the biodegradable material is buried in the ground or otherwise comes in contact with the microorganisms including contact under environmental conditions conducive to the growth of the microorganisms. Suitable biodegradable polymers also include those biodegradable materials which are environmentally degradable using aerobic or anaerobic digestion procedures, or by virtue of being exposed to environmental elements such as sunlight, rain, moisture, wind, temperature, and the like. The biodegradable thermoplastic polymers can be used individually or as a combination of polymers provided that the biodegradable thermoplastic polymers are degradable by biological and environmental means.

Nonlimiting examples of biodegradable thermoplastic polymers suitable for use in the present invention include aliphatic polyesteramides; diacids/diols aliphatic polyesters; modified aromatic polyesters including modified polyethylene terephthalates, modified polybutylene terephthalates; aliphatic/aromatic copolyesters; polycaprolactones; poly(hydroxyalkanoates) including poly(hydroxybutyrate-co-hydroxyvalerate), poly(hydroxybutyrate-co-hexanoate), or other higher poly(hydroxybutyrate-co-alkanoates) as referenced in U.S. patent 5,498,692 to Noda, herein incorporated by reference; polyesters and polyurethanes derived from aliphatic

polyols (i.e., dialkanoyl polymers); polyamides; polyethylene/vinyl alcohol copolymers; lactic acid polymers including lactic acid homopolymers and lactic acid copolymers; lactide polymers including lactide homopolymers and lactide copolymers; glycolide polymers including glycolide homopolymers and glycolide copolymers; and mixtures thereof. Preferred are aliphatic polyesteramides, diacids/diols aliphatic polyesters, aliphatic/aromatic copolyesters, lactic acid polymers, and lactide polymers.

Specific examples of aliphatic polyesteramides suitable for use as a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer herein include, but are not limited to, aliphatic polyesteramides which are reaction products of a synthesis reaction of diols, dicarboxylic acids, and aminocarboxylic acids; aliphatic polyesteramides formed from reacting lactic acid with diamines and dicarboxylic acid dichlorides; aliphatic polyesteramides formed from caprolactone and caprolactam; aliphatic polyesteramides formed by reacting acid-terminated aliphatic ester prepolymers with aromatic diisocyanates; aliphatic polyesteramides formed by reacting aliphatic esters with aliphatic amides; and mixtures thereof. Aliphatic polyesteramides formed by reacting aliphatic esters with aliphatic amides are most preferred. Polyvinyl alcohol or its copolymers are also suitable polymers.

Aliphatic polyesteramides which are copolymers of aliphatic esters and aliphatic amides can be characterized in that these copolymers generally contain from about 30% to about 70%, preferably from about 40% to about 80% by weight of aliphatic esters, and from about 30% to about 70%, preferably from about 20% to about 60% by weight of aliphatic amides. The weight average molecular weight of these copolymers range from about 10,000 g/mol to about 300,000 g/mol, preferably from about 20,000 g/mol to about 150,000 g/mol as measured by the known gel chromatography technique used in the determination of molecular weight of polymers.

The aliphatic ester and aliphatic amide copolymers of the preferred aliphatic polyesteramides are derived from monomers such as dialcohols including ethylene glycol, diethylene glycol, 1,4-butanediol, 1,3-propanediol, 1,6-hexanediol, and the like; dicarboxylic acids including oxalic acid, succinic acid, adipic acid, oxalic acid esters, succinic acid esters, adipic acid esters, and the like; hydroxycarboxylic acid and lactones including caprolactone, and the like; aminoalcohols including ethanolamine, propanolamine, and the like; cyclic lactams including ϵ -caprolactam, lauric lactam, and the like; ω -aminocarboxylic acids including aminocaproic acid, and the like; 1:1 salts of dicarboxylic acids and diamines including 1:1 salt mixtures of dicarboxylic acids such as adipic acid, succinic acid, and the like, and diamines such as hexamethylenediamine, diaminobutane, and the like; and mixtures thereof. Hydroxy-

terminated or acid-terminated polyesters such as acid terminated oligoesters can also be used as the ester-forming compound. The hydroxy-terminated or acid terminated polyesters typically have weight or number average molecular weights of from about 200 g/mol to about 10,000 g/mol.

5 The aliphatic polyesteramides can be prepared by any suitable synthesis or stoichiometric technique known in the art for forming aliphatic polyesteramides having aliphatic ester and aliphatic amide monomers. A typical synthesis involves stoichiometrically mixing the starting monomers, optionally adding water to the reaction mixture, polymerizing the monomers at an elevated temperature of about 220°C, and subsequently removing the water and excess
10 monomers by distillation using vacuum and elevated temperature, resulting in a final copolymer of an aliphatic polyesteramide. Other suitable techniques involve transesterification and transamidation reaction procedures. As apparent by those skilled in the art, a catalyst can be used in the above-described synthesis reaction and transesterification or transamidation procedures, wherein suitable catalysts include phosphorous compounds, acid catalysts, magnesium acetates,
15 zinc acetates, calcium acetates, lysine, lysine derivatives, and the like.

 The preferred aliphatic polyesteramides comprise copolymer combinations of adipic acid, 1,4-butanediol, and 6-aminocaproic acid with an ester portion of 45%; adipic acid, 1,4-butanediol, and ε-caprolactam with an ester portion of 50%; adipic acid, 1,4-butanediol, and a 1:1 salt of adipic acid and 1,6-hexamethylenediamine; and an acid-terminated oligoester made from
20 adipic acid, 1,4-butanediol, 1,6-hexamethylenediamine, and ε-caprolactam. These preferred aliphatic polyesteramides have melting points of from about 115°C to about 155°C and relative viscosities (1 wt. % in m-cresol at 25°C) of from about 2.0 to about 3.0, and are commercially available from Bayer Aktiengesellschaft located in Leverkusen, Germany under the BAK® tradename. A specific example of a commercially available polyesteramide is BAK® 404-004.

25 Specific examples of preferred diacids/diols aliphatic polyesters suitable for use as a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer herein include, but are not limited to, aliphatic polyesters produced either from ring opening reactions or from the condensation polymerization of acids and alcohols, wherein the number average molecular weight of these aliphatic polyesters typically range from about 30,000 g/mol to about 50,000 g/mol. The preferred diacids/diols
30 aliphatic polyesters are reaction products of a C₂-C₁₀ diol reacted with oxalic acid, succinic acid, adipic acid, suberic acid, sebacic acid, copolymers thereof, or mixtures thereof. Nonlimiting examples of preferred diacids/diols include polyalkylene succinates such as polyethylene succinate, and polybutylene succinate; polyalkylene succinate copolymers such as polyethylene

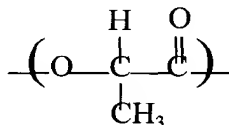
succinate/adipate copolymer, and polybutylene succinate/adipate copolymer; polypentamethyl succinates; polyhexamethyl succinates; polyheptamethyl succinates; polyoctamethyl succinates; polyalkylene oxalates such as polyethylene oxalate, and polybutylene oxalate; polyalkylene oxalate copolymers such as polybutylene oxalate/succinate copolymer and polybutylene oxalate/adipate copolymer; polybutylene oxalate/succinate/adipate terpolymers; and mixtures thereof. An example of a suitable commercially available diacid/diol aliphatic polyester is the polybutylene succinate/adipate copolymers sold as BIONOLLE 1000 series and BIONOLLE 3000 series from the Showa Highpolymer Company, Ltd. Located in Tokyo, Japan.

Specific examples of preferred aliphatic/aromatic copolyesters suitable for use as a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer herein include, but are not limited to, those aliphatic/aromatic copolyesters that are random copolymers formed from a condensation reaction of dicarboxylic acids or derivatives thereof and diols. Suitable dicarboxylic acids include, but are not limited to, malonic, succinic, glutaric, adipic, pimelic, azelaic, sebacic, fumaric, 2,2-dimethyl glutaric, suberic, 1,3-cyclopentanedicarboxylic, 1,4-cyclohexanedicarboxylic, 1,3-cyclohexanedicarboxylic, diglycolic, itaconic, maleic, 2,5-norbornanedicarboxylic, 1,4-terephthalic, 1,3-terephthalic, 2,6-naphthoic, 1,5-naphthoic, ester forming derivatives thereof, and combinations thereof. Suitable diols include, but are not limited to, ethylene glycol, diethylene glycol, triethylene glycol, tetraethylene glycol, propylene glycol, 1,3-propanediol, 2,2-dimethyl-1,3-propanediol, 1,3-butanediol, 1,4-butanediol, 1,5-pentanediol, 1,6-hexanediol, 2,2,4-trimethyl-1,6-hexanediol, thiodiethanol, 1,3-cyclohexanedimethanol, 1,4-cyclohexanedimethanol, 2,2,4,4-tetramethyl-1,3-cyclobutanediol, and combinations thereof. Nonlimiting examples of such aliphatic/aromatic copolyesters include a 50/50 blend of poly(tetramethylene glutarate-co-terephthalate), a 60/40 blend of poly(tetramethylene glutarate-co-terephthalate), a 70/30 blend of poly(tetramethylene glutarate-co-terephthalate), an 85/15 blend of poly(tetramethylene glutarate-co-terephthalate), a 50/45/5 blend of poly(tetramethylene glutarate-co-terephthalate-co-diglycolate), a 70/30 blend of poly(ethylene glutarate-co-terephthalate), an 85/15 blend of poly(tetramethylene adipate-co-terephthalate), an 85/15 blend of poly(tetramethylene succinate-co-terephthalate), a 50/50 blend of poly(tetramethylene-co-ethylene glutarate-co-terephthalate), and a 70/30 blend of poly(tetramethylene-co-ethylene glutarate-co-terephthalate). These aliphatic/aromatic copolyesters, in addition to other suitable aliphatic/aromatic polyesters, are further described in U.S. Patent No. 5,292,783 issued to Buchanan et al. on March 8, 1994, which descriptions are incorporated by reference herein. An example of a suitable commercially available aliphatic/aromatic copolyester is the

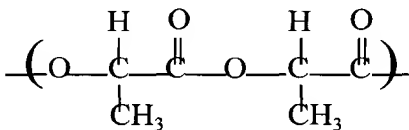
poly(tetramethylene adipate-co-terephthalate) sold as EASTAR BIO Copolyester from Eastman Chemical or ECOFLEX from BASF.

Specific examples of preferred lactic acid polymers and lactide polymers suitable for use as a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer herein include, but are not limited to, those polylactic acid-based polymers and polylactide-based polymers that are generally referred to in the industry as "PLA". Therefore, the terms "polylactic acid", "polylactide" and "PLA" are used interchangeably to include homopolymers and copolymers of lactic acid and lactide based on polymer characterization of the polymers being formed from a specific monomer or the polymers being comprised of the smallest repeating monomer units. In other words, polylactide is a dimeric ester of lactic acid and can be formed to contain small repeating monomer units of lactic acid (actually residues of lactic acid) or be manufactured by polymerization of a lactide monomer, resulting in polylactide being referred to both as a lactic acid residue containing polymer and as a lactide residue containing polymer. It should be understood, however, that the terms "polylactic acid", "polylactide", and "PLA" are not intended to be limiting with respect to the manner in which the polymer is formed.

The polylactic acid polymers generally have a lactic acid residue repeating monomer unit that conforms to the following formula :



The polylactide polymers generally having lactic acid residue repeating monomer units as described herein-above, or lactide residue repeating monomer units that conform to the following formula:



Typically, polymerization of lactic acid and lactide will result in polymers comprising at least about 50% by weight of lactic acid residue repeating units, lactide residue repeating units, or combinations thereof. These lactic acid and lactide polymers include homopolymers and copolymers such as random and/or block copolymers of lactic acid and/or lactide. The lactic acid residue repeating monomer units can be obtained from L-lactic acid and D-lactic acid. The lactide residue repeating monomer units can be obtained from L-lactide, D-lactide, and meso-lactide.

Suitable lactic acid and lactide polymers include those homopolymers and copolymers of lactic acid and/or lactide which have a weight average molecular weight generally ranging from about 10,000 g/mol to about 600,000 g/mol, preferably from about 30,000 g/mol to about 400,000 g/mol, more preferably from about 50,000 g/mol to about 200,000 g/mol. An example of commercially available polylactic acid polymers include a variety of polylactic acids that are available from the Chronopol Incorporation located in Golden, Colorado, and the polylactides sold under the tradename EcoPLA®. Examples of suitable commercially available polylactic acid is NATUREWORKS from Cargill Dow and LACEA from Mitsui Chemical. Preferred is a homopolymer or copolymer of poly lactic acid having a melting temperature from about 160° to about 175°C. Modified poly lactic acid and different stereo configurations may also be used, such as poly L-lactic acid and poly D,L-lactic acid with D-isomer levels up to 75%.

Depending upon the specific polymer used, the process, and the final use of the fiber, more than one polymer may be desired. It is preferred that two differential polymers are used. For example, if a crystallizable polylactic acid having a melting temperature of from about 160° to about 175° C is used, a second polylactic acid having a lower melting point and lower crystallinity than the other polylactic acid and/or a higher copolymer level may be used. Alternatively, an aliphatic aromatic polyester may be used with crystallizable polylactic acid. If two polymer are desired, the polymers need only differ by chemical stereo specificity or by molecular weight.

In one aspect of the invention, it may be desirable to use a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer having a glass transition temperature of less than 0°C. Polymers having this low glass transition temperature include EASTAR BIO and BIONELLE.

The biodegradable thermoplastic polymers of the present invention is present in an amount to improve the mechanical properties of the fiber, improve the processability of the melt, and improve attenuation of the fiber. The selection of the polymer and amount of polymer will also determine if the fiber is thermally bondable and effect the softness and texture of the final product. Typically, when in the starch/polymer blend, the biodegradable thermoplastic polymers are present in an amount of from about 1% to about 99%, preferably from about 10% to about 80%, more preferably from about 30% to about 70%, and most preferably from about 40% to about 60%, by weight of the fiber. Alternatively, one component of the multicomponent fiber may be up to 100% of one or more biodegradable thermoplastic polymers with this component not containing any starch.

Plasticizer

The plasticizer can be used in the present invention to destructure the starch and enable the starch to flow, i.e. create a thermoplastic starch. The same plasticizer may be used to increase melt processability or two separate plasticizers may be used. The plasticizers may also improve the flexibility of the final products, which is believed to be due to the lowering of the glass transition temperature of the composition by the plasticizer. The plasticizers should preferably be substantially compatible with the polymeric components of the present invention so that the plasticizers may effectively modify the properties of the composition. As used herein, the term "substantially compatible" means when heated to a temperature above the softening and/or the melting temperature of the composition, the plasticizer is capable of forming a substantially homogeneous mixture with starch.

An additional plasticizer for the biodegradable thermoplastic polymer may be present to lower the polymer's melting temperature and improve overall compatibility with the thermoplastic starch blend. Furthermore, biodegradable thermoplastic polymers with higher melting temperatures may be used if plasticizers or diluents are present which suppress the melting temperature of the polymer. The plasticizer will typically have a molecular weight of less than about 100,000 g/mol and may preferably be a block or random copolymer or terpolymer where one or more of the chemical species is compatible with another plasticizer, starch, polymer, or combinations thereof.

Nonlimiting examples of useful hydroxyl plasticizers include sugars such as glucose, sucrose, fructose, raffinose, maltodextrose, galactose, xylose, maltose, lactose, mannose erythrose, glycerol, and pentaerythritol; sugar alcohols such as erythritol, xylitol, malitol, mannitol and sorbitol; polyols such as ethylene glycol, propylene glycol, dipropylene glycol, butylene glycol, hexane triol, and the like, and polymers thereof; and mixtures thereof. Also useful herein as hydroxyl plasticizers are poloxomers and poloxamines. Also suitable for use herein are hydrogen bond forming organic compounds which do not have hydroxyl group, including urea and urea derivatives; anhydrides of sugar alcohols such as sorbitan; animal proteins such as gelatin; vegetable proteins such as sunflower protein, soybean proteins, cotton seed proteins; and mixtures thereof. Other suitable plasticizers are phthalate esters, dimethyl and diethylsuccinate and related esters, glycerol triacetate, glycerol mono and diacetates, glycerol mono, di, and tripropionates, butanoates, stearates, lactic acid esters, citric acid esters, adipic acid esters, stearic acid esters, oleic acid esters, and other fatty acid esters which are biodegradable. Aliphatic acids such as ethylene acrylic acid, ethylene maleic acid, butadiene acrylic acid, butadiene maleic acid, propylene acrylic acid, propylene maleic acid, and other hydrocarbon

based acids. All of the plasticizers may be use alone or in mixtures thereof. A low molecular weight plasticizer is preferred. Suitable molecular weights are less than about 10,000 g/mol, preferably less than about 5,000 g/mol and more preferably less than about 1,000 g/mol.

Preferred plasticizers include glycerin, mannitol, and sorbitol. The amount of plasticizer is dependent upon the molecular weight, amount of starch, and the affinity of the plasticizer for the starch. Generally, the amount of plasticizer increases with increasing molecular weight of starch. Typically, the plasticizer present in the final multicomponent fiber composition comprises from about 2% to about 90%, more preferably from about 5% to about 70%, most preferably from about 10% to about 50%. The plasticizer may be present in one or more of the components.

Optional Materials

Optionally, other ingredients may be incorporated into the composition. These optional ingredients may be present in quantities of less than about 50%, preferably from about 0.1% to about 20%, and more preferably from about 0.1% to about 12% by weight of the composition. The optional materials may be used to modify the processability and/or to modify physical properties such as elasticity, tensile strength and modulus of the final product. Other benefits include, but are not limited to, stability including oxidative stability, brightness, flexibility, color, resiliency, workability, processing aids, viscosity modifiers, and odor control. Nonlimiting examples include salts, slip agents, crystallization accelerators or retarders, odor masking agents, cross-linking agents, emulsifiers, surfactants, cyclodextrins, lubricants, other processing aids, optical brighteners, antioxidants, flame retardants, dyes, pigments, fillers, proteins and their alkali salts, waxes, tackifying resins, extenders, and mixtures thereof. Slip agents may be used to help reduce the tackiness or coefficient of friction in the fiber. Also, slip agents may be used to improve fiber stability, particularly in high humidity or temperatures. A suitable slip agent is polyethylene. A salt may also be added to the melt. The salt may help to solubilize the starch, reduce discoloration, make the fiber more water responsive, or used as a processing aid. A salt will also function to help reduce the solubility of a binder so it does not dissolve, but when put in water or flushed, the salt will dissolve then enabling the binder to dissolve and create a more aqueous responsive product. Nonlimiting examples of salts include sodium chloride, potassium chloride, sodium sulfate, ammonium sulfate and mixtures thereof.

Other additives are typically included with the starch polymer as a processing aid and to modify physical properties such as elasticity, dry tensile strength, and wet strength of the extruded fibers. Suitable extenders for use herein include gelatin, vegetable proteins such as

sunflower protein, soybean proteins, cotton seed proteins, and water soluble polysaccharides; such as alginates, carrageenans, guar gum, agar, gum arabic and related gums, pectin, water soluble derivatives of cellulose, such as alkylcelluloses, hydroxyalkylcelluloses, and carboxymethylcellulose. Also, water soluble synthetic polymers, such as polyacrylic acids, polyacrylic acid esters, polyvinylacetates, polyvinylalcohols, and polyvinylpyrrolidone, may be used.

Lubricant compounds may further be added to improve the flow properties of the starch material during the processes used for producing the present invention. The lubricant compounds can include animal or vegetable fats, preferably in their hydrogenated form, especially those which are solid at room temperature. Additional lubricant materials include mono-glycerides and di-glycerides and phosphatides, especially lecithin. For the present invention, a preferred lubricant compound includes the mono-glyceride, glycerol mono-stearate.

Further additives including inorganic fillers such as the oxides of magnesium, aluminum, silicon, and titanium may be added as inexpensive fillers or processing aides. Other inorganic materials include hydrous magnesium silicate, titanium dioxide, calcium carbonate, clay, chalk, boron nitride, limestone, diatomaceous earth, mica glass quartz, and ceramics. Additionally, inorganic salts, including alkali metal salts, alkaline earth metal salts, phosphate salts, may be used as processing aides. Other optional materials that modify the water responsiveness of the thermoplastic starch blend fiber are stearate based salts, such as sodium, magnesium, calcium, and other stearates, as well as rosin component, such as gum rosin.

Other additives may be desirable depending upon the particular end use of the product contemplated. For example, in products such as toilet tissue, disposable towels, facial tissues and other similar products, wet strength is a desirable attribute. Thus, it is often desirable to add to the starch polymer cross-linking agents known in the art as "wet strength" resins. A general dissertation on the types of wet strength resins utilized in the paper art can be found in TAPPI monograph series No. 29, Wet Strength in Paper and Paperboard, Technical Association of the Pulp and Paper Industry (New York, 1965). The most useful wet strength resins have generally been cationic in character. Polyamide-epichlorohydrin resins are cationic polyamide amine-epichlorohydrin wet strength resins which have been found to be of particular utility. Glyoxylated polyacrylamide resins have also been found to be of utility as wet strength resins.

It is found that when suitable cross-linking agent such as Parex[®] is added to the starch composition of the present invention under acidic condition, the composition is rendered water insoluble. Still other water-soluble cationic resins finding utility in this invention are urea

formaldehyde and melamine formaldehyde resins. The more common functional groups of these polyfunctional resins are nitrogen containing groups such as amino groups and methyl groups attached to nitrogen. Polyethylenimine type resins may also find utility in the present invention. For the present invention, a suitable cross-linking agent is added to the composition in quantities ranging from about 0.1% by weight to about 10% by weight, more preferably from about 0.1% by weight to about 3% by weight. The starch and polymers in the fibers of the present invention may be chemically associated if in the same composition. The chemical association may be a natural consequence of the polymer chemistry or may be engineered by selection of particular materials. This is most likely to occur if a cross-linking agent is present. The chemical association may be observed by changes in molecular weight, NMR signals, or other methods known in the art. Advantages of chemical association include improved water sensitivity, reduced tackiness, and improved mechanical properties, among others.

Other polymers, such as non-degradable polymers, may also be used in the present invention depending upon final use of the fiber, processing, and degradation or flushability required. Commonly used thermoplastic polymers and copolymers include polypropylene, polyethylene, polyamides, polyesters, and mixtures thereof. The amount of non-degradable polymers will be from about 0.1% to about 40% by weight of the fiber. Other polymers such as high molecular weight polymers with molecular weights above 500,000 may also be used.

After the fiber is formed, the fiber may further be treated or the bonded fabric can be treated. A hydrophilic or hydrophobic finish can be added to adjust the surface energy and chemical nature of the fabric. For example, fibers that are hydrophobic may be treated with wetting agents to facilitate absorption of aqueous liquids. A bonded fabric can also be treated with a topical solution containing surfactants, pigments, slip agents, salt, or other materials to further adjust the surface properties of the fiber.

(2) Configuration

The multiconstituent fibers of the present invention may be in many different configurations. Constituent, as used herein, is defined as meaning the chemical species of matter or the material. Multiconstituent fiber, as used herein, is defined to mean a fiber containing more than one chemical species or material. Generally, fibers may be of monocomponent or multicomponent in configuration. Component, as used herein, is defined as a separate part of the fiber that has a spatial relationship to another part of the fiber. The term multicomponent, as used herein, is defined as a fiber having more than one separate part in spatial relationship to one

another. The term multicomponent includes bicomponent, which is defined as a fiber having two separate parts in a spatial relationship to one another. The different components of multicomponent fibers are arranged in substantially distinct regions across the cross-section of the fiber and extend continuously along the length of the fiber.

5 Spunbond structures, staple fibers, hollow fibers, shaped fibers, such as multi-lobal fibers and multicomponent fibers can all be produced by using the compositions and methods of the present invention. The bicomponent and multicomponent fibers may be in a side-by-side, sheath-core, segmented pie, ribbon, islands-in-the-sea configuration, or any combination thereof. The sheath may be continuous or non-continuous around the core. The ratio of the weight of the
10 sheath to the core is from about 5:95 to about 95:5. The fibers of the present invention may have different geometries that include round, elliptical, star shaped, rectangular, and other various eccentricities.

The fibers of the present invention may also be splittable fibers. Rheological, thermal, and solidification differential behavior can potentially cause splitting. Splitting may also occur
15 by a mechanical means such as ringrolling, stress or strain, use of an abrasive, or differential stretching, and/or by fluid induced distortion, such as hydrodynamic or aerodynamic.

A plurality of microfibrils may also result from the present invention. The microfibrils are very fine fibers contained within a multi-constituent monocomponent or multicomponent extrudate. The plurality of polymer microfibrils have a cable-like morphological structure and
20 longitudinally extend within the fiber, which is along the fiber axis. To enable the microfibrils to be formed in the present invention, a sufficient amount of polymer is required to generate a co-continuous phase morphology such that the polymer microfibrils are formed in the starch matrix. Typically, greater than 15%, preferably from about 15% to about 90%, more preferably from about 25% to about 80%, and more preferably from about 35% to about 70% of polymer is
25 desired. A "co-continuous phase morphology" is found when the microfibrils are substantially longer than the diameter of the fiber. Microfibrils are typically from about 0.1 micrometers to about 10 micrometers in diameter while the fiber typically has a diameter of from about (10 times the microfibril) 10 micrometers to about 50 micrometers. In addition to the amount of polymer, the molecular weight of the thermoplastic polymer must be high enough to induce
30 sufficient entanglement to form microfibrils. The preferred molecular weight is from about 10,000 to about 500,000 g/mol. The formation of the microfibrils also demonstrates that the resulting fiber is not homogeneous, but rather that polymer microfibrils are formed within the starch matrix. The microfibrils comprised of the degradable polymer will mechanically reinforce

the fiber to improve the overall tensile strength and make the fiber thermally bondable. Alternatively, microfibrils can be obtained by co-spinning starch and polymer melt without phase mixing, as in an islands-in-a-sea bicomponent configuration. In an islands-in-a-sea configuration, there may be several hundred fine fibers present.

5 There are many different combinations for the multicomponent fibers of the present invention. A starch/polymer blend may be both the sheath and the core with one of the components containing more starch or polymer than the other component. The starch in the starch/polymer blend may be in any suitable amount depending upon desired use of the multicomponent fiber. Alternatively, the starch/polymer blend may be the sheath with the core
10 being pure polymer or starch. The starch/polymer composition could also be the core with the sheath being pure polymer or starch. For example, a bicomponent fibers with a core of pure starch and the sheath containing either pure polymer or a starch/polymer blend may be desired where the fibers are used in a thermal bonding process. This configuration allows for high biodegradability and low cost due to the high content of starch, but the fiber is still thermally
15 bondable.

 The present invention may have any variations on the bicomponent fibers in a sheath-core configuration. For example, the core or sheath may contain microfibrils. The sheath may be continuous or noncontinuous around the core. The sheath-core configuration may also be found in multicomponent fibers. There may be more than one sheath surrounding the core. For
20 example, an inner sheath may surround the core with an outer sheath surrounding the inner sheath. Alternatively, the core could have an islands-in-the-sea configuration or a segmented pie.

 The exact configuration of the multicomponent fiber desired is dependent upon the use of the fiber. A major advantage of the multicomponent fiber compared to the monocomponent fiber is that there is spatial control over the placement of the starch and/or polymer in the fiber. This is
25 advantageous for enabling thermal bonding, reducing stickiness of the starch, and other resulting properties of the fiber. A preferred configuration is a bicomponent fiber with starch contained in the core and the thermoplastic polymer in the sheath. This configuration will help the starch to have improved long term stability by protecting the starch from aging, discoloration, mold, an other things in the environment. Also, this particular configuration will reduce the potential
30 stickiness of the feel of the starch and allow for the fiber to be easily thermally bondable. The multicomponent fibers can be used as a whole fiber or the starch can be removed to only use the thermoplastic polymer. The starch can be removed through bonding methods, hydrodynamic entanglement, post-treatment such as mechanical deformation, or dissolving in water. The fibers

having the starch removed may be used in nonwoven articles that are desired to be extra soft and/or have better barrier properties. Additionally, because starch is an inexpensive material, the starch and polymer fibers with the starch removed will be a more cost-effective fiber.

Figure 1 is schematic drawings illustrating a cross-sectional view of a bicomponent fiber having a sheath-core configuration. Components X and Y may be a thermoplastic starch, a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer, or a blend of the starch and polymer.

Figure 1A illustrates a concentric sheath-core configuration with Component X comprising the solid core and Component Y comprising the continuous sheath.

Figure 1B illustrates a sheath-core configuration with Component X comprising the solid core and Component Y comprising the shaped continuous sheath.

Figure 1C illustrates a sheath-core configuration with Component X comprising the hollow core and Component Y comprising the continuous sheath.

Figure 1D illustrates a sheath-core configuration with Component X comprising the hollow core and Component Y comprising the shaped continuous sheath.

Figure 1E illustrates a sheath-core configuration with Component X comprising the solid core and Component Y comprising the discontinuous sheath.

Figure 1F illustrates a sheath-core configuration with Component X comprising the solid core and Component Y comprising the discontinuous sheath.

Figure 1G illustrates a sheath-core configuration with Component X comprising the hollow core and Component Y comprising the discontinuous sheath.

Figure 1H illustrates a sheath-core configuration with Component X comprising the hollow core and Component Y comprising the discontinuous sheath.

Figure 1I illustrates an eccentric sheath-core configuration with Component X comprising the solid core and Component Y comprising the continuous sheath.

Figure 2 is schematic drawings illustrating a cross-sectional view of a bicomponent fiber having a segmented pie configuration. Components X and Y may be a thermoplastic starch, a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer, or a blend of the starch and polymer.

Figure 2A illustrates a solid eight segmented pie configuration.

Figure 2B illustrates a hollow eight segmented pie configuration. This configuration is a suitable configuration for producing splittable fibers.

Figure 3 is schematic drawing illustrating a cross-sectional view of a bicomponent fiber having a ribbon configuration. Components X and Y may be a thermoplastic starch, a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer, or a blend of the starch and polymer.

Figure 4 is schematic drawings illustrating a cross-sectional view of a bicomponent fiber having a side-by-side configuration. Components X and Y may be a thermoplastic starch, a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer, or a blend of the starch and polymer.

Figure 4A illustrates a side-by-side configuration.

5 Figure 4B illustrates a side-by-side configuration with a rounded adjoining line. The adjoining line is where two components meet. Component Y is present in a higher amount than Component X.

Figure 4C is a side-by-side configuration with Component Y being positioned on either side of Component X with a rounded adjoining line.

10 Figure 4D is a side-by-side configuration with Component Y being positioned on either side of Component X.

Figure 4E is a shaped side-by-side configuration with Component Y being positioned on the tips of Component X.

15 Figure 5 is schematic drawings illustrating a cross-sectional view of a bicomponent fiber having an islands-in-the-sea configuration. Components X and Y may be a thermoplastic starch, a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer, or a blend of the starch and polymer.

Figure 5A is a solid islands-in the-sea configuration with Component X being surrounded by Component Y. Component X is triangular in shape.

20 Figure 5B is a solid islands-in the-sea configuration with Component X being surrounded by Component Y.

Figure 5C is a hollow islands-in the-sea configuration with Component X being surrounded by Component Y.

25 Figure 6 is schematic drawing illustrating a cross-sectional view of a tricomponent fiber having a ribbon configuration. Components X, Y, and Z may be a thermoplastic starch, a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer, or a blend of the starch and polymer.

30 Figure 7 is schematic drawing illustrating a cross-sectional view of a tricomponent fiber having a concentric sheath-core configuration with Component X comprising the solid core, Component Y comprising the inside continuous sheath, and Component Z comprising the outside continuous sheath. Components X, Y, and Z may be a thermoplastic starch, a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer, or a blend of the starch and polymer.

Figure 8 is schematic drawing illustrating a cross-sectional view of a multicomponent fiber having a solid eight segmented pie configuration. Components X, Y, Z, and W may be a

thermoplastic starch, a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer, or a blend of the starch and polymer.

Figure 9 is a schematic drawing illustrating a cross-sectional view of a tricomponent fiber having a solid islands-in-the-sea configuration. Component X surrounds the single island comprising Component Y and the plurality of islands comprising Component Z. Components X, Y, and Z may be a thermoplastic starch, a biodegradable thermoplastic polymer, or a blend of the starch and polymer.

(3) Material Properties

The multicomponent fibers produced in the present invention are environmentally degradable. "Environmentally degradable" is defined as being biodegradable, disintegratable, dispersible, flushable, or compostable or a combination thereof. In the present invention, the multicomponent fibers, nonwoven webs, and articles will be environmentally degradable. As a result, the fibers can be easily and safely disposed of either in existing composting facilities or may be flushable and can be safely flushed down the drain without detrimental consequences to existing sewage infrastructure systems. The environmental degradability of the fibers of the present inventions offer a solution to the problem of accumulation of such materials in the environment following their use is disposable articles. The flushability of the multicomponent fibers of the present invention when used in disposable products such as wipes and feminine hygiene items offer additional convenience and discretion to the consumer. Although biodegradability, disintegratability, dispersibility, compostibility, and flushability all have different criteria and are measured through different tests, generally the fibers of the present invention will meet more than one of these criteria. The specific configuration of the multicomponent fiber may affect the rate of environmental degradation. For example, because starch will typically degrade faster than the polymer, a bicomponent fiber with a high amount of starch in the sheath will degrade very quickly.

Biodegradable is defined as meaning when the matter is exposed to an aerobic and/or anaerobic environment, the ultimate fate is reduction to monomeric components due to microbial, hydrolytic, and/or chemical actions. Under aerobic conditions, biodegradation leads to the transformation of the material into end products such as carbon dioxide and water. Under anaerobic conditions, biodegradation leads to the transformation of the materials into carbon dioxide, water, and methane. The biodegradability process is often described as mineralization.

Biodegradability means that all organic constituents of the fibers are subject to decomposition eventually through biological activity.

There are a variety of different standardized biodegradability methods that have been established over time by various organization and in different countries. Although the tests vary in the specific testing conditions, assessment methods, and criteria desired, there is reasonable convergence between different protocols so that they are likely to lead to similar conclusions for most materials. For aerobic biodegradability, the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) has established ASTM D 5338-92: Test methods for Determining Aerobic Biodegradation of Plastic Materials Under Controlled Composting Conditions. The test measures the percent of test material that mineralizes as a function of time by monitoring the amount of carbon dioxide being released as a result of assimilation by microorganisms in the presence of active compost held at a thermophilic temperature of 58°C. Carbon dioxide production testing may be conducted via electrolytic respirometry. Other standard protocols, such as 301B from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), may also be used. Standard biodegradation tests in the absence of oxygen are described in various protocols such as ASTM D 5511-94. These tests are used to simulate the biodegradability of materials in an anaerobic solid-waste treatment facility or sanitary landfill. However, these conditions are less relevant for the type of disposable applications that are described for the multicomponent fibers and nonwovens in the present invention.

The multicomponent fibers of the present invention will likely rapidly biodegrade. Quantitatively, this is defined in terms of percent of material converted to carbon dioxide after a given amount of time. The fibers of the present invention containing x % starch and y % biodegradable thermoplastic polymer, and optionally other ingredients, will aerobically biodegrade under standard conditions such that fibers exhibit: $x/2$ % conversion to carbon dioxide in less than 10 days and $(x + y)/2$ % conversion to carbon dioxide in less than 60 days. Disintegration occurs when the fibrous substrate has the ability to rapidly fragment and break down into fractions small enough not to be distinguishable after screening when composted or to cause drainpipe clogging when flushed. A disintegratable material will also be flushable. Most protocols for disintegratability measure the weight loss of test materials over time when exposed to various matrices. Both aerobic and anaerobic disintegration tests are used. Weight loss is determined by the amount of fibrous test material that is no longer collected on an 18 mesh sieve with 1 millimeter openings after the materials is exposed to wastewater and sludge. For disintegration, the difference in the weight of the initial sample and the dried weight of the

sample recovered on a screen will determine the rate and extent of disintegration. The testing for biodegradability and disintegration are very similar as a similar environment, or the same environment, will be used for testing. To determine disintegration, the weight of the material remaining is measured while for biodegradability, the evolved gases are measured.

5 The fibers of the present invention will rapidly disintegrate. Quantitatively, this is defined in terms of relative weight loss of each component after a given amount of time. The fibers of the present invention containing x % starch and y % biodegradable thermoplastic polymer, and optionally other ingredients, will aerobically disintegrate when exposed to activated sludge in the presence of oxygen under standard conditions such that fibers exhibit: $x/2$ %
10 weight loss in less than 10 days and $(x + y)/2$ % weight loss in less than 60 days. Preferably, the fibers will exhibit $x/2$ % weight loss in less than 5 days and $(x + y)/2$ % weight loss in less than 28 days, more preferably $x/2$ % weight loss in less than 3 days and $(x + y)/2$ % weight loss in less than 21 days, even more preferably $(x/1.5)$ % weight loss in less than 5 days and $(x + y) / 1.5$ % weight loss in less than 21 days, and most preferably $x/1.2$ % weight loss in less than 5 days and
15 $(x + y)/1.2$ % weight loss in less than 21 days.

The fibers of the present invention will also be compostable. ASTM has developed test methods and specifications for compostability. The test measures three characteristics: biodegradability, disintegration, and lack of ecotoxicity. Tests to measure biodegradability and disintegration are described above. To meet the biodegradability criteria for compostability, the
20 material must achieve at least about 60% conversion to carbon dioxide within 40 days. For the disintegration criteria, the material must have less than 10% of the test material remain on a 2 millimeter screen in the actual shape and thickness that it would have in the disposed product. To determine the last criteria, lack of ecotoxicity, the biodegradation byproducts must not exhibit a negative impact on seed germination and plant growth. One test for this criteria is detailed in
25 OECD 208. The International Biodegradable Products Institute will issue a logo for compostability once a product is verified to meet ASTM 6400-99 specifications. The protocol follows Germany's DIN 54900 which determine the maximum thickness of any material that allows complete decomposition within one composting cycle.

The fibers described herein are typically used to make disposable nonwoven articles.
30 The articles are commonly flushable. The term "flushable" as used herein refers to materials which are capable of dissolving, dispersing, disintegrating, and/or decomposing in a septic disposal system such as a toilet to provide clearance when flushed down the toilet without clogging the toilet or any other sewage drainage pipe. The fibers and resulting articles may also

be aqueous responsive. The term aqueous responsive as used herein means that when placed in water or flushed, an observable and measurable change will result. Typical observations include noting that the article swells, pulls apart, dissolves, or observing a general weakened structure.

5 The tensile strength of a starch fibers is approximately 15 Mega Pascal (MPa). The fibers of the present invention will have a tensile strength of greater than about 20MPa, preferably greater than about 35MPa, and more preferably greater than about 50MPa. Tensile strength is measured using an Instron following a procedure described by ASTM standard D 3822-91 or an equivalent test.

10 The multicomponent fibers of the present invention are not brittle and have a toughness of greater than 2MPa. Toughness is defined as the area under the stress-strain curve where the specimen gauge length is 25 mm with a strain rate of 50 mm per minute. Elasticity or extensible of the fibers may also be desired.

15 The multicomponent fibers of the present invention may be thermally bondable if enough polymer is present. Thermally bondable fibers are required for the pressurized heat and thru-air heat bonding methods. Thermally bondable is typically achieved when the polymer is present at a level of greater than about 15%, preferably greater than about 30%, most preferably greater than about 40%, and most preferably greater than about 50% by weight of the fiber. Consequently, if a very high starch content is in the sheath, the fiber may exhibit a decreased tendency toward thermal bondability.

20 A "highly attenuated fiber" is defined as a multicomponent fiber having a high draw down ratio. The total fiber draw down ratio is defined as the ratio of the fiber at its maximum diameter (which is typically results immediately after exiting the capillary) to the final fiber diameter in its end use. The total fiber draw down ratio via either staple, spunbond, or meltblown process will be greater than 1.5, preferable greater than 5, more preferably greater than 10, and most preferably
25 greater than 12. This is necessary to achieve the tactile properties and useful mechanical properties.

Preferably, the highly attenuated multicomponent fiber will have a diameter of less than 200 micrometers. More preferably the fiber diameter will be 100 micrometer or less, even more preferably 50 micrometers or less, and most preferably less than 30 micrometers. Fibers
30 commonly used to make nonwovens will have a diameter of from about 5 micrometers to about 30 micrometers. Fiber diameter is controlled by spinning speed, mass through-put, and blend composition.

The nonwoven products produced from the multicomponent fibers will also exhibit certain mechanical properties, particularly, strength, flexibility, softness, and absorbency. Measures of strength include dry and/or wet tensile strength. Flexibility is related to stiffness and can attribute to softness. Softness is generally described as a physiologically perceived attribute which is related to both flexibility and texture. Absorbency relates to the products' ability to take up fluids as well as the capacity to retain them.

(4) Processes

The first step in producing a multicomponent fiber is the compounding or mixing step. In the compounding step, the raw materials are heated, typically under shear. The shearing in the presence of heat will result in a homogeneous melt with proper selection of the composition. The melt is then placed in an extruder where fibers are formed. A collection of fibers is combined together using heat, pressure, chemical binder, mechanical entanglement, and combinations thereof resulting in the formation of a nonwoven web. The nonwoven is then assembled into an article.

15 Compounding

The objective of the compounding step is to produce a homogeneous melt composition comprising the starch, polymer, and/or plasticizer. If a constituent is being produced that is only starch or polymer and not both, the compounding step will be modified to account for the desired composition. Preferably, the melt composition is homogeneous, meaning that a uniform distribution is found over a large scale and that no distinct regions are observed.

The resultant melt composition should be essentially free of water to spin fibers. Essentially free is defined as not creating substantial problems, such as causing bubbles to form which may ultimately break the fiber while spinning. Preferably, the free water content of the melt composition is less than about 1%, more preferably less than about 0.5%, and most preferably less than 0.1%. The total water content includes the bound and free water. To achieve this low water content, the starch and polymers may need to be dried before processed and/or a vacuum is applied during processing to remove any free water. Preferably, the thermoplastic starch is dried at 60°C before spinning.

In general, any method using heat, mixing, and pressure can be used to combine the biodegradable polymer, starch, and plasticizer. The particular order or mixing, temperatures, mixing speeds or time, and equipment are not critical as long as the starch does not significantly degrade and the resulting melt is homogeneous.

A preferred method of mixing for a starch and two polymer blend is as follow:

1. The polymer having a higher melting temperature is heated and mixed above its melting point. Typically, this is 30° - 70° C above its melting temperature. The mixing time is from about 2 to about 10 minutes, preferably around 5 minutes. The polymer is then cooled, typically to 120° - 140° C.
- 5 2. The starch is fully destructurized. This starch can be destructurized by dissolving in water at 70° - 100° C at a concentration of 10 - 90% starch depending upon the molecular weight of the starch, the desired viscosity of the destructurized starch, and the time allowed for destructurizing. In general, approximately 15 minutes is sufficient to destructurize the starch but 10 minutes to 30 minutes may be necessary depending upon conditions. A
10 plasticizer can be added to the destructurized starch if desired.
3. The cooled polymer from step 1 and the destructurized starch from step 2 are then combined. The polymer and starch can be combined in an extruder or a batch mixer with shear. The mixture is heated, typically to approximately 120° - 140° C. This results in vaporization of any water. If desired to flash off all water, the mixture should be mixed
15 until all of the water is gone. Typically, the mixing in this step is from about 2 to about 15 minutes, typically it is for approximately 5 minutes. A homogenous blend of starch and polymer is formed.
4. A second polymer is then added to the homogeneous blend of step 3. This second polymer may be added at room temperature or after it has been melted and mixed. The
20 homogeneous blend from step 3 is continued to be mixed at temperatures from about 100° C to about 170° C. The temperatures above 100° C are needed to prevent any moisture from forming. If not added in step 2, the plasticizer may be added now. The blend is continued to be mixed until it is homogeneous. This is observed by noting no distinct regions. Mixing time is generally from about 2 to about 10 minutes, commonly around 5
25 minutes.

The most preferred mixing device is a multiple mixing zone twin screw extruder with multiple injection points. The multiple injection points can be used to add the destructurized starch and polymer. A twin screw batch mixer or a single screw extrusion system can also be used. As
30 long as sufficient mixing and heating occurs, the particular equipment used is not critical.

An alternative method for compounding the materials is by adding the plasticizer, starch, and polymer to an extrusion system where they are mixed in progressively increasing temperatures. For example, in a twin screw extruder with six heating zones, the first three zones may be heated to

90°, 120°, and 130° C, and the last three zones will be heated above the melting point of the polymer. This procedure results in minimal thermal degradation of the starch and for the starch to be fully destructured before intimate mixing with the thermoplastic materials.

Another process is to use a higher temperature melting polymer and inject the starch at the very end of the process. The starch is only at a higher temperature for a very short amount of time which is not enough time to burn.

Spinning

The present invention utilizes the process of melt spinning. In melt spinning, there is no mass loss in the extrudate. Melt spinning is differentiated from other spinning, such as wet or dry spinning from solution, where a solvent is being eliminated by volatilizing or diffusing out of the extrudate resulting in a mass loss.

Spinning will occur at 120°C to about 230°, preferably 185° to about 190°. Fiber spinning speeds of greater than 100 meters/minute are required. Preferably, the fiber spinning speed is from about 1,000 to about 10,000 meters/minute, more preferably from about 2,000 to about 7,000, and most preferably from about 2,500 to about 5,000 meters/minute. The polymer composition must be spun fast to avoid brittleness in the fiber.

Continuous fibers can be produced through spunbond methods or meltblowing processes or non-continuous (staple fibers) fibers can be produced. The various methods of fiber manufacturing can also be combined to produce a combination technique.

The homogeneous blend can be melt spun into multicomponent fibers on commercially available melt spinning equipment. The equipment will be chosen based on the desired configuration of the multicomponent fiber. Commercially available melt spinning equipment is available from Hills, Inc. located in Melbourne, Florida. The temperature for spinning range from about 100° C to about 230° C. The processing temperature is determined by the chemical nature, molecular weights and concentration of each component. The fibers spun can be collected using conventional godet winding systems or through air drag attenuation devices. If the godet system is used, the fibers can be further oriented through post extrusion drawing at temperatures from about 50 to about 140° C. The drawn fibers may then be crimped and/or cut to form non-continuous fibers (staple fibers) used in a carding, airlaid, or fluidlaid process.

(5) Articles

The multicomponent fibers may be converted to nonwovens by different bonding methods. Continuous fibers can be formed into a web using industry standard spunbond type technologies while staple fibers can be formed into a web using industry standard carding, airlaid, or wetlaid technologies. Typical bonding methods include: calendar (pressure and heat), thru-air heat, mechanical entanglement, hydrodynamic entanglement, needle punching, and chemical bonding and/or resin bonding. The calendar, thru-air heat, and chemical bonding are the preferred bonding methods for the starch and polymer multicomponent fibers. Thermally bondable fibers are required for the pressurized heat and thru-air heat bonding methods.

The multicomponent fibers of the present invention may also be bonded or combined with other synthetic or natural fibers to make nonwoven articles. The synthetic or natural fibers may be blended together in the forming process or used in discrete layers. Suitable synthetic fibers include fibers made from polypropylene, polyethylene, and polyester, polyacrylates, and copolymers thereof and mixtures thereof. Natural fibers include cellulosic fibers and derivatives thereof. Suitable cellulosic fibers include those derived from any tree or vegetation, including hardwood fibers, softwood fibers, hemp, and cotton. Also included are fibers made from processed natural cellulosic resources such as rayon.

The multicomponent fibers of the present invention may be used to make nonwovens, among other suitable articles. Nonwoven articles are defined as articles that contains greater than 15% of a plurality of fibers that are continuous or non-continuous and physically and/or chemically attached to one another. The nonwoven may be combined with additional nonwovens or films to produce a layered product used either by itself or as a component in a complex combination of other materials, such as a baby diaper or feminine care pad. Preferred articles are disposable, nonwoven articles. The resultant products may find use in filters for air, oil and water; vacuum cleaner filters; furnace filters; face masks; coffee filters, tea or coffee bags; thermal insulation materials and sound insulation materials; nonwovens for one-time use sanitary products such as diapers, feminine pads, and incontinence articles; biodegradable textile fabrics for improved moisture absorption and softness of wear such as micro fiber or breathable fabrics; an electrostatically charged, structured web for collecting and removing dust; reinforcements and webs for hard grades of paper, such as wrapping paper, writing paper, newsprint, corrugated paper board, and webs for tissue grades of paper such as toilet paper, paper towel, napkins and facial tissue; medical uses such as surgical drapes, wound dressing, bandages, dermal patches and self-dissolving sutures; and dental uses such as dental floss and toothbrush bristles. The fibrous web may also include odor absorbents, termite repellants, insecticides, rodenticides, and the like,

for specific uses. The resultant product absorbs water and oil and may find use in oil or water spill clean-up, or controlled water retention and release for agricultural or horticultural applications. The resultant starch fibers or fiber webs may also be incorporated into other materials such as saw dust, wood pulp, plastics, and concrete, to form composite materials, which can be used as building materials such as walls, support beams, pressed boards, dry walls and backings, and ceiling tiles; medical uses such as casts, splints, and tongue depressors; and in fireplace logs for decorative and/or burning purpose. Preferred articles of the present invention include disposable nonwovens for hygiene and medical applications. Hygiene applications include such items as wipes; diapers, particularly the top sheet or back sheet; and feminine pads or products, particularly the top sheet.

Examples

The following non-limiting examples are illustrative of multicomponent configurations of the present invention. The amount of material for the polymer and starch are in parts of the component. The components are a 50:50 mass ratio. The starches used in the examples below are StarDri 100, StaDex 10, StaDex 15, StaDex 65, all from Staley. The crystalline PLA has an intrinsic viscosity of 0.97 dL/g with an optical rotation of -14.2 . The amorphous PLA has an intrinsic viscosity of 1.09 dL/g with an optical rotation of -12.7 .

Example 1 Sheath-core bicomponent fiber: The blend for the core is compounded using 70 parts StarDri 100, 10 parts Eastar Bio and 30 parts sorbital. The blend for the sheath is compounded using 30 parts StarDri 100, 70 parts Eastar Bio and 20 parts sorbital. Each ingredient is added concurrently to an extrusion system where they are mixed in progressively increasing temperatures. This procedure minimizes the thermal degradation to the starch that occurs when the starch is heated above 180°C for significant periods of time. This procedure also allows the starch to be fully destructured before intimate mixing with the thermoplastic materials.

Example 2 Sheath-core bicomponent fiber: The blend for the sheath contains crystalline PLA. The blend for the core is compounded as in Example 1 using 30 parts StaDex 65, 50 parts amorphous PLA and 20 parts sorbital.

Example 3 Hollow eight segmented pie bicomponent fiber: The blend for the first segment contains Eastar Bio. The blend for the second component is compounded as in Example 1 using 70 parts StarDri 100, 10 parts Eastar Bio and 30 parts sorbital.

- 5 **Example 4** Sheath-core bicomponent fiber: The blend for the core contains crystalline PLA. The blend for the sheath is compounded as in Example 1 using 30 parts StaDex 10, 15 parts amorphous PLA, 45 parts crystalline PLA and 15 parts sorbital.

- Example 5** Side-by-side bicomponent fiber: The blend for the firsts segment contains Bionelle.
10 The blend for the second component is compounded as in Example 1 using 70 parts StarDri 100 and 30 parts sorbital.

- Example 6** Sheath-core bicomponent fiber: The blend for the sheath segment contains Bionelle. The blend for the core is compounded as in Example 1 using 50 parts StaDex 15 and
15 50 parts sorbital.

- Example 7** Sheath-core bicomponent fiber: The blend for the core contains crystalline PLA. The blend for the sheath is compounded as in Example 1 using 70 parts StarDri 100 and 30 parts sorbital. After the bicomponent fiber is spun, the starch containing sheath is dissolved in water.
20 The remaining PLA fiber can then be used to make a nonwoven web. The dissolved starch and water can be recycled and used again.

The disclosures of all patents, patent applications (and any patents which issue thereon, as well as any corresponding published foreign patent applications), and publications mentioned
25 throughout this description are hereby incorporated by reference herein. It is expressly not admitted, however, that any of the documents incorporated by reference herein teach or disclose the present invention.

While particular embodiments of the present invention have been illustrated and described, it would be obvious to those skilled in the art that various other changes and
30 modifications can be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. It is intended to cover in the appended claims all such changes and modifications that are within the scope of the invention.